



House of Commons
Public Administration Select
Committee

**The Work of the
Committee in 2005–06**

First Report of Session 2006-07

*Report, together with formal minutes and
written evidence*

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The Public Administration Select Committee

The Public Administration Select Committee is appointed by the House of Commons to examine the reports of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration, of the Health Service Commissioners for England, Scotland and Wales and of the Parliamentary Ombudsman for Northern Ireland, which are laid before this House, and matters in connection therewith and to consider matters relating to the quality and standards of administration provided by civil service departments, and other matters relating to the civil service.

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Grant Shapps MP (Conservative, Welwyn Hatfield)
Jenny Willott MP (Liberal Democrats, Cardiff Central)

The following Member was also a member of the Committee for part of this inquiry: Julia Goldsworthy MP (Liberal Democrats, Falmouth and Cambourne).

Powers

The Committee is one of the select committees, the powers of which are set out in House of Commons Standing Orders, principally in SO No 146. These are available on the Internet via www.parliament.uk.

Publications

The Reports and evidence of the Committee are published by The Stationery Office by Order of the House. All publications of the Committee (including press notices) are on the Internet at <http://www.parliament.uk/pasc>.

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The current staff of the Committee are Eve Samson (Clerk), James Gerard (Second Clerk), Lucinda Maer (Committee Specialist), Anna Watkins (Committee Assistant) and Louise Glen (Secretary).

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1 Introduction

1. This report reviews the activities of the Public Administration Select Committee in 2005 and 2006. The Committee's inquiries have reflected the broad scope of our standing order:

to examine the reports of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration, of the Health Service Commissioners for England, Scotland and Wales and of the Parliamentary Ombudsman for Northern Ireland, which are laid before this House, and matters in connection therewith and to consider matters relating to the quality and standards of administration provided by civil service departments, and other matters relating to the civil service.¹

2. As we are not a departmental committee, we are particularly concerned with the quality of administration across government. We look at the consistency and coherence of government policy and practice across the myriad departments and other public bodies, and our oversight role gives us a valuable insight into the workings of government in the round, allowing us to draw broad constitutional and administrative conclusions. In addition, we scrutinise the work of the Cabinet Office, as the Government department with particular responsibility for civil service issues.

3. Our work has been informed by engagement with practical issues. We continue to benefit from our relationship with the Parliamentary Commissioner for Administration (hereafter the Ombudsman), and several of our inquiries over the last year have arisen out of issues identified by that officer. We have also continued to undertake work in the light of the indicative “core tasks” identified by the Liaison Committee. This report considers our main activities in the last session in relation to those core tasks.

4. The previous report on the work of this committee looked at the work of the committee in 2004.² No report was made for the remainder of the 2004-05 session, owing to the general election. Table 1 (below) sets out the subjects we have covered since the election. For the sake of completeness, we have provided a brief tabular summary of the Jan-April 2005 period at table 1a. In that period our predecessor committee completed its inquiries into *Choice, Voice and Public Services*³, and into *Government by Inquiry*⁴, responded to the Government's consultation on the Civil Service Bill⁵, conducted its regular scrutiny of *Ministerial Accountability and Parliamentary Questions*⁶ and took extensive evidence on Civil Service Effectiveness.⁷

5. As in previous years, our work has both benefited from the work done by predecessors, and looked at new and emerging issues. We have found reason for particular concentration

1 Standing Orders of the House of Commons, S.O. No 146

2 Second Report of Session 2004-05, *The Work of the Committee in 2004*, HC (2004-05) 306

3 Fourth Report of Session 2004-05, *Choice, Voice and Public Services*, HC (2004-05) 49-1

4 First Report of Session 2004-05, *Government by Inquiry*, HC (2004-05) 51-1

5 Third Report of Session 2004-05, *Response to the Government's Consultation on the Civil Service Bill*, HC (2004-05) 336

6 Fifth Report of Session 2004-05, *Ministerial Accountability and Parliamentary Questions*, HC (2004-05) 449-1

7 *Civil Service Effectiveness*, HC (2004-05) 307

on the constitutional relationships between ministers, civil servants and parliament, and a number of our inquiries have considered these relationships. The evidence taken on civil service effectiveness has provided a valuable resource for these inquiries.

6. There has been one significant change: we have not conducted an inquiry into Parliamentary Questions, because the Procedure Committee wished to undertake its own inquiry into the system. Rather than artificially separate consideration of Questions into a Procedure Committee inquiry, and our own regular, narrower, monitoring, we agreed that it was far more sensible for the Procedure Committee to undertake a full inquiry. We consider our annual reports on the way in which Questions were answered have been valuable in providing information, and in exerting pressure on departments to improve their performance. We hope that regular monitoring will continue in some form in future, although it may well be that it is no longer appropriate for this committee to undertake it. We look forward to seeing the Procedure Committee's recommendations.

Table 1: Subjects covered by the Public Administration Select Committee, 2005–06

Subject	Evidence sessions in 2005-06*	Outcome
A Debt of Honour	3	Report, January 2006
Tax Credits: Putting Things Right	2	Report, January 2006
Legislative and Regulatory Reform Bill	-	Report, April 2006
Propriety and Honours: Interim Findings	2	Report, July 2006
Whitehall Confidential? The Publication of Political Memoirs	5	Report, July 2006
The Ombudsman in Question: the Ombudsman's report on pensions and its constitutional implications	3	Report, July 2006
The Ministerial Code: the case for independent investigation	-	Report, July 2006
Civil Service Effectiveness	1	Evidence, October 2005
Review of Government Communications	2	Evidence, October 2005 and November 2006
Implications of ID Cards for Public Services	1	Evidence, November 2005
Work of the Cabinet Office	1	Evidence, November 2005
Ethics and Standards	8	Evidence, February-June 2006. Report to be published.
Politics and Administration: Ministers and Civil Servants	7	Evidence, November 2005 to June 2006. Report to be published.
Governing the Future	7	Evidence, December 2005 to October 2006. Report to be published.
Skills for Government	4	Evidence, October 2006 to present. Report to be published.

Table 1a: Subjects covered by the Public Administration Select Committee, January—April 2005

Subject	Evidence sessions in 2005	Outcome
Government by Inquiry	1	Report, February 2005
Work of the Committee in 2004	-	Report, February 2005
Response to the Government's Consultation on the Civil Service Bill	-	Report, February 2005
Choice, Voice and Public Services	6	Report, March 2005
Ministerial Accountability and Parliamentary Questions	-	Report, March 2005
Civil Service Effectiveness	4	Evidence, April 2005

For this purpose each panel of witnesses has been considered as an evidence session.

2 Core Tasks

Government policy proposals

7. As our predecessor committees have done, we have given early consideration to those government proposals—wherever they emanate—which appear to have significant implications for the nature of public administration in this country. We have also particularly monitored the policy proposals put forward by the Cabinet Office.

The Legislative and Regulatory Reform Bill

8. By far the most constitutionally significant proposal put forward in 2005-06 was the Government's Legislative and Regulatory Reform Bill (now enacted in substantially amended form). We were concerned that the Bill, as originally drafted, granted the Government powers which were far too wide. The Bill lacked an effective Parliamentary veto on the use of the new order-making process, and gave extraordinary freedom for shortcutting Parliamentary processes on even the most significant matters if the orders were implementing Law Commission proposals. Our report called for significant limitations on the circumstances in which the new streamlined Regulatory Reform Order process might be used—including limiting the purposes of such orders to reducing the burdens of regulation, and limiting the Acts which might be amended by such orders.⁸

9. Other committees shared our concerns: the Regulatory Reform Committee,⁹ the Procedure Committee¹⁰ and the Constitution Committee of the House of Lords¹¹ all reported on the Bill and contributed to the Parliamentary and public debate which ultimately shifted the Government's position.

10. The Government responded to this pressure by making significant amendments to the Bill.¹² These included a limitation on the purposes for which the new order-making processes might be used, and a limitation on which Acts might be amended. The Act as finally passed contained significant further limitations on the use of the new process, which we welcome—including preventing it being used to implement Law Commission proposals, or to amend the act itself or the Human Rights Act 1998.

11. The eventual outcome was a demonstration of the effectiveness of Parliament. While we do not doubt the Government's intentions in designing the proposed new process were benign, the process could easily have been put to invidious uses by future governments. Previous proposals for new legislative procedures to make regulatory reform easier had

8 Third Report of Session 2005-06, *Legislative and Regulatory Reform Bill* HC (2005-06) 1033

9 Regulatory Reform Committee, First Special Report of Session 2005-06, *Legislative and Regulatory Reform Bill*, HC (2005-06) 878

10 Procedure Committee, First Report of Session 2005-06, *Legislative and Regulatory Reform Bill*, HC (2005-06) 894

11 House of Lords Constitution Committee, Eleventh Report of Session 2005-06, *Legislative and Regulatory Reform Bill*, HL (2005-06) 194

12 Fifth Special Report of Session 2005-06, *Legislative and Regulatory Reform Bill: Government Response to the Committee's Third Report*, HC (2005-06) 1205

extensive consultation and—in the case of the Regulatory Reform Act 2001—a form of pre-legislative scrutiny. Pre-legislative scrutiny of this Bill might have averted many of the mistakes which were made. Nonetheless, the dramatically amended Act stands as testament to the impact of the Select Committee system.

Other Proposals

12. The Committee has been closely following the programme of Departmental Capability Reviews announced by the Cabinet Secretary when he appeared before us in October 2005. The first of these have reported, and their findings have formed part of our Skills for Government inquiry, looking at Civil Service capability. We took evidence from three former ministers: the Rt Hon Mr Charles Clarke, Member for Norwich South; the Rt Hon Mr Nick Raynsford, Member for Greenwich & Woolwich; and the Rt Hon Baroness Shephard of Northwold. We also took evidence from officials at the Cabinet Office, representatives of three trade unions representing civil servants, Mr David Walker of the Guardian, and Professor Colin Talbot of Manchester Business School. We are continuing that inquiry and will report in 2007.

13. We also considered the implications of ID Cards for public services by taking evidence from Professor Patrick Dunleavy of the London School of Economics; from Mr Tony Collins, the Executive Editor of Computer Weekly; and from Mr Richard Tyndall, Principal Consultant at Mouchel Parkman. The session raised questions not only about the practical applicability of ID cards, which remains a live issue, but also about the extent to which Parliament should accept being asked to legislate for large-scale projects without first seeing detailed and independently assured business cases for those projects.¹³

Areas seen as requiring examination because of deficiencies

Propriety and Honours

14. In 2004, our predecessor committee conducted a major inquiry into the honours system.¹⁴ Early in 2006 we decided to undertake a further evidence session following up that report with a particular focus on the propriety aspects of the honours system. Allegations that honours were being offered in return for donations to party funds and sponsorship of the Government's city academy schools prompted us to extend this into a substantive inquiry, *Propriety and Honours*. On 14 March we announced that, as part of our current inquiry into ethics and standards in public life, the Committee would investigate whether the machinery for scrutiny of honours and peerages for political service was working.

15. In a separate development, following complaints from a Member of this House, the police began investigating allegations under the Honours (Prevention of Abuses) Act 1925 and the Political Parties Elections and Referendums Act 2000. The police asked us to defer our inquiry to avoid prejudice to their investigation. We have been briefed by the police on their investigation several times since March. We have proceeded on the principle that we

¹³ *Implications of ID Cards for Public Services*, HC (2005-06) 712-i

¹⁴ Fifth Report of Session 2003-04, *A Matter of Honour: Reforming the Honours System*, HC (2003-04) 212-1

should be as open as possible without in any way releasing prejudicial material, and so the briefings that we have given and papers that we have published have been discussed with the police and, through them, the Crown Prosecution Service.

16. One difficulty that has arisen has been that although the hearings held by the Committee would be covered by Parliamentary privilege and material issued by the Committee itself might not be directly prejudicial, the Committee has no way in which to control subsequent press speculation based on release of this material. We considered proceeding in private, but decided against this since we felt that one of the great merits of the select committee system was the openness of its proceedings, and that it was undesirable to take evidence that might not be released for a considerable time. Given this, we were concerned that conducting the inquiry as we wished might be prejudicial. Accordingly, even though the matters complained of were not technically sub judice, we have paused our inquiry until such time as we are able to proceed without risk of adverse effects on the administration of justice.

17. We were, however, able to publish an interim report, on matters relating to the honours system more broadly, having heard evidence from representatives of the Metropolitan Police, the Crown Prosecution Service and the House of Lords Appointment Commission. Our report noted that under the current system, which is only an interim measure until reform of the second chamber is completed, it is perfectly legitimate for parties to reflect their political priorities through their choice of membership of the Parliamentary parties in the Upper House.¹⁵ We also noted that there was scope for greater transparency and greater scrutiny in the process of appointments to the House of Lords. We welcomed the changes made to the Electoral Administration Act and the declaration of all outstanding party loans to the Electoral Commission, and repeated our hope that all parties will observe not only the letter but the spirit of the law.

18. As we stated in our interim report, we intend to review the law as it reflects public life and corruption, taking any lessons from this case once the police investigation and any subsequent proceedings are complete, and we have invited the police to contribute to that review. We still firmly intend to do so. However, there have been reports that we have invited the police to pass us their dossier on the investigation once it has closed. This is not the case.

19. We are pleased to note that recently the Cabinet Office has responded to the recommendation of our predecessor committee, repeated in our interim report, that honours should be clearly distinguished from membership of the legislature conferred by peerage. It has published material on its website making it entirely clear that honours and peerages should not be confused, and while honours recognise an individual's achievements, peerages are not honours.¹⁶ The Government has also implemented our predecessors' recommendation that recipients of honours should have an emblem suitable for wearing with non-formal dress.¹⁷

15 Fourth Report of Session 2005-06, *Propriety and Honours: Interim Findings*, HC (2005-06) 1119

16 Cabinet Office, http://www.honours.gov.uk/news/010506_removal.aspx

17 Cabinet Office, <http://www.honours.gov.uk/emblems.aspx>

Other deficiencies

20. Mutual trust between ministers, civil servants and special advisers is essential to effective government. A string of highly publicised memoirs last year led us to investigate whether there were deficiencies in the system for dealing with these critical relationships. Our report *Whitehall Confidential? The Publication of Political Memoirs*¹⁸ suggested that copyright on material drawn from life in government should be assigned to the Crown, allowing the Crown to take action if an author published without agreement. This would provide a financial incentive to authors to submit to clearance arrangements—which should be streamlined, fair and have a bias in favour of publication. Crucially, new arrangements should apply equally to ministers as they do to staff with contractual terms.

21. We remain very concerned that there is no body charged with investigating allegations of breaches of the Ministerial Code. Our predecessor committee raised this in 2001¹⁹ and the concern was repeated by the Committee on Standards in Public Life in 2003.²⁰ The continuing deficiency became glaring in 2005-06 with questions about the conduct of David Blunkett, who resigned over a failure to heed the code, and of Tessa Jowell and John Prescott. Our report *The Ministerial Code: The Case For Independent Investigation* concluded that independent investigation would not only increase accountability of ministers, but it would also be fairer to those accused than trial by media.²¹

22. We have also conducted an inquiry, *Governing The Future*, into how the Government finds a balance between planning for long term future problems like global warming and sustainable development and addressing pressing issues of the day, bearing in mind that long-term problems are likely to be less electorally pressing and would be faced by different governments. We intend to report on this shortly.

The work of the Ombudsman

23. As a Committee, we do not look at individual departments, but we do look at the work of Ann Abraham, the Parliamentary Ombudsman—both in terms of the management of the office, and in considering the Ombudsman’s reports. Often these alert us to wider administrative issues, particularly when the maladministration identified affects considerable numbers of citizens, as it has done in several recent cases. We have been greatly concerned by the Government’s apparent willingness to argue with the Ombudsman over whether its actions have constituted maladministration. As the Ombudsman has maintained, it is possible to distinguish between recommendations for redress, where government has legitimate grounds for resistance, and findings of maladministration. In extreme cases, the Ombudsman may make reports under section 10(3) of the Parliamentary Commissioner Act 1967, where the Ombudsman believed that the Government’s failings amounted to maladministration leading to injustice “and the

18 Fifth Report of Session 2005-06, *Whitehall Confidential? The Publication of Political Memoirs*, HC (2005-06) 689-I

19 Third Report of Session 2000-01, *The Ministerial Code: Improving the Rule Book*, HC (2000-01) 235

20 Committee on Standards in Public Life, *Defining the Boundaries Within the Executive: Ministers, Special Advisers and the Permanent Civil Service*, Cm 5775, 08 April 2003

21 Seventh Report of Session 2005-06, *The Ministerial Code: The Case For Independent Investigation*, HC (2005-06) 1457

injustice has not been, or will not be, remedied.” This power has been used only four times: two of these occasions have been in the last year.

24. We investigated both these cases, reviewing the Ombudsman’s work and findings and calling both parties to account. A positive example of how the relationship can work emerged in our inquiry *A Debt of Honour* into the Ministry of Defence’s ex gratia scheme for civilian internees of Japanese internment camps during the Second World War.²² The Department initially challenged the Ombudsman’s finding of maladministration in the introduction (never publicised) of a blood link criterion in determining whether applicants for payments were “British civilians”. Our inquiry found that this was indeed maladministration, and the Department has subsequently removed this criterion and commissioned a full internal inquiry—the results of which were released in July 2006. Some former civilian internees remain excluded from the scheme, even under the new criteria. We have arranged to take oral evidence from the Minister to discuss the reasons for the new criteria, and the lessons of the internal inquiry, on 25 January 2007.

25. The most prominent example of the Government’s willingness to challenge maladministration findings has been its rejection of the findings of the Ombudsman’s report on final salary occupational pension schemes which wound up between 6 April 1997 and 31 March 2004, without sufficient funds to give their members the benefits which had been previously promised. As many as 125,000 people may have been affected. We began our investigation following the Government’s negative response to the Ombudsman’s Special Report—made, as previously stated, under section 10(3) of the Parliamentary Commissioner Act 1967, because the Ombudsman believed that the Government’s failings amounted to maladministration leading to injustice “and the injustice has not been, or will not be, remedied.” We believe that the injustice has still not been remedied, and that the recompense offered to those who lost out through the Financial Assistance Scheme falls substantially short of what is required. We shall continue to search for ways to remedy this.²³

26. The Committee was also concerned that the Government had appeared to challenge a legitimate finding of maladministration in the Ombudsman’s report on Tax Credits,²⁴ and the Government’s response to our report did not even attempt to address this failing.²⁵ The actions taken by the Government were, however, sufficient that the Ombudsman did not feel the need to make a report under section 10(3). HM Revenue and Customs (HMRC) has recognised the need to provide better customer service to the recipients of tax credits—by their very nature some of the poorest and most vulnerable members of British society. The Treasury Committee is monitoring the system. We are heartened that the Government’s response to our report recognised the concerns we (and the Ombudsman) raised, and that HMRC is working with the Ombudsman’s office to improve the system. Nonetheless, we will continue to monitor the situation in our regular meetings with the Ombudsman.

22 First Report of Session 2005-06, *A Debt of Honour*, HC (2005-06) 735

23 Sixth Report of Session 2005-06, *The Ombudsman in Question: the Ombudsman's report on pensions and its constitutional implications*, HC (2005-06) 1081

24 Second Report of Session 2005-06, *Tax Credits: putting things right*, HC (2005-06) 577

25 Fourth Special Report of Session 2005-06, *Tax Credits: putting things right: Government Response to the Committee's Second Report*, HC (2005-06) 1076

Associated public bodies and major appointments

27. In our parallel inquiries on *Ethics and Standards* and on *Politics and Administration*, we have looked at the whole framework of ethical regulation and public appointments, which is managed by bodies associated to the Cabinet Office such as the Office for the Commissioner on Public Appointments and the Civil Service Commissioners. We will report on both of these inquiries in 2007.

28. The Government Information and Communication Service was established following a review of government communications called for by our predecessor committee. In our last annual report we looked forward to taking evidence from Howell James, the newly appointed Permanent Secretary for Government Communications, to see how well the new arrangements would bed down.²⁶ We have now taken evidence from Mr James twice, and continue to monitor the performance of the GICS.

Draft Legislation

29. We are still awaiting the outcome of the consultation on the Government's draft Civil Service Bill on which our predecessors commented.²⁷ That consultation closed on 28 February 2005. Cabinet Office guidelines state that a summary of responses and ensuing policy changes should be published within three months. We do not believe that there was an unusually heavy amount of responses to process (which might explain this significant delay). It is unacceptable that there should have been no follow up.

Examination of Expenditure and PSA targets

30. We undertake an annual examination of the Cabinet Office's performance and expenditure following the publication of its annual report, drawing on the valuable expertise of the Scrutiny Unit of the Committee Office. We look at both the accounts and the performance against PSA targets. In the 2005–06 session we held an evidence session with the then Minister for the Cabinet Office, the Rt Hon Mr John Hutton MP, on 1 November 2005. We also regularly take evidence from the Cabinet Secretary and Head of the Home Civil Service, when these issues can also be discussed.

31. In addition to these hearings, we undertake extensive scrutiny of Cabinet Office accounts, expenditure and performance in relation to its targets, through correspondence. We have engaged in exchanges on both the estimates and the Annual Report. We have been concerned to ensure that we understand all financial documents, and have not always found the financial information provided by the Cabinet Office to be timely, helpful or complete. A mass of information is made public in a wide variety of forms; part of our task has been to ask the Cabinet Office to ensure that the information it gives in these core documents, and in the Estimates Memoranda which support them, is comprehensive and comprehensible even if this means that information published elsewhere is repeated. We believe the Cabinet Office could improve the quality of its information still further, and will continue to press it to do so through our regular correspondence on its financial reports; in

26 HC (2004-05) 306, para 13

27 Cabinet Office, A Draft Civil Service Bill, Cm 6373, November 2004

particular, we hope that in future the Cabinet Office will produce Estimates Memoranda which conform more closely to the guidance provided by the Scrutiny Unit.

32. Despite these criticisms, we wish to record that although it has often needed extensive correspondence to clarify the information provided, the Cabinet Office has been full and helpful in its replies, going so far as to provide us with a copy of its Financial Management Review. It has also provided disaggregated data on surveys of public managers' views of reform, broken down according to sector. We have published this correspondence alongside the oral evidence given by the Minister for the Cabinet Office.²⁸

Assisting the House

33. On 7 December 2006, the Committee held a debate on the floor of the House of Commons on the subject of occupational pensions and the Government's failure to respond adequately to the criticisms made by the Parliamentary Ombudsman. The debate was both well attended and well informed, and made it clear that PASC's much publicised concerns were shared by many Members.

34. We were also pleased to debate our 2003-04 report *A Matter of Honour: Reforming the Honours System* in Westminster Hall. We believe that the debate showed that there is much support for significant change, and we were pleased to hear the Government saw the debate as part of a "general evolution" of the honours system.²⁹

35. In addition to these debates, our report on the Legislative and Regulatory Reform Bill was tagged on the second reading debate of that Bill.

28 *The Work of the Cabinet Office*, HC (2005-06) 630-i

29 HC Deb, 27 April 2006, col 372WH

Table 2: Liaison Committee criteria relevant to 2005–06 inquiries

	Government and Commission policy proposals	Examination of deficiencies	Departmental actions	Associated public bodies	Major appointments	Implementation of legislation	Draft legislation	Expenditure	Evidence from Minister	Public Service Agreements
Civil Service Effectiveness	✓	✓	✓					✓		✓
Ethics and Standards		✓		✓				✓		
Whitehall Confidential? The Publication of Political Memoirs	✓	✓	✓						✓ ³⁰	
Politics and Administration: Ministers and Civil Servants		✓		✓	✓					
Governing the Future		✓								
Propriety and Honours		✓	✓	✓						
Ombudsman: Debt of Honour	✓	✓	✓			✓			✓ ³¹	
Ombudsman: Pensions	✓	✓	✓			✓			✓ ³²	
Ombudsman: Tax Credits	✓	✓	✓			✓				
Implications of ID cards for Public Services	✓					✓				
Review of Government Communications					✓					
The Work of the Cabinet Office	✓		✓					✓	✓	✓
The Legislative and Regulatory Reform Bill	✓									
The Ministerial Code	✓	✓								
Skills for Government	✓	✓	✓		✓					✓

30 Evidence was taken from the Foreign Secretary

31 Evidence was taken from the Minister for Veterans

32 Evidence was taken from the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions

3 The Committee at work

Working Methods

36. Our main method of working remains the traditional one of inviting written memoranda, and of taking oral evidence, in public unless there are overwhelming reasons not to do so. In addition, we have been assisted by the National Audit Office which has provided valuable background briefing, particularly on the third sector. We continue to arrange seminars to discuss important questions of public administration. Our most recent seminar, entitled “Public Administration: What are the Issues?”, was held in October 2005, and served the valuable dual purpose of both raising awareness of the work of the committee and shaping our thinking about our future programme. We are grateful to all the participants, who ranged from academics and journalists to experienced practitioners from various fields, and commend this approach to other committees.

37. We also continue to use committee visits, both within and outside the United Kingdom, to inform our inquiries and our general understanding of public administration. During 2005-06 our visits have helped to frame the findings of our inquiries, and also to influence us in deciding on future inquiries. Details of our visits during the period are in table 3 below. Where possible, we use visits to inform more than one inquiry.

38. This Committee has made the process for appointing its Specialist Advisers more open and transparent. We invited individuals with relevant experience or expertise to put their names forward as prospective specialist advisers, and we have since maintained a list of such persons which has been invaluable when setting up new inquiries. The exercise found a large number of highly qualified candidates from a range of different backgrounds, many of whom would not have been identified by previous methods. We are grateful to all our applicants, and especially to those who have advised us on our work in 2005-06.

Table 3: Visits by the Public Administration Select Committee in 2005-06

Location	Purpose of visit
Edinburgh, Scotland	Governing the Future, Ethics and Standards
United States: New York and Boston	Putting People First, Skills for Government
Ethical Regulators and Cabinet Office, Whitehall	Ethics and Standards, Work of the Cabinet Office
National School for Government, Sunningdale, Berkshire	Skills for Government
Stockholm, Sweden and Helsinki, Finland	Governing the Future, Politics and Administration

Relationship with Departments

39. The breadth of the Committee’s remit, which potentially stretches across the whole of government, means that we have to focus on areas which we consider to be of particular importance or topicality. The assistance of Government, particularly at the ‘Centre’, is therefore important. Our relationship with the Cabinet Office is vital and we are pleased by the continued support they have provided to us. We are particularly grateful for their support in arranging committee visits, for example to the National School for Government.

40. We have not always found the Government co-operative. The Liaison Committee’s annual report for 2004 noted that the Government had adopted its informal guidance on select committees for officials (the “Osmotherley Rules”) to state that the presumption should be that Committee requests on attendance of civil servant witnesses, including special advisers, would be agreed to; and the Liaison Committee also noted that while these were warm words, they would need to be put to the test in individual departments.³³ During our inquiry into strategic thinking in government, we hoped to take evidence from Lord Birt, as a key strategic adviser to the Prime Minister. As has happened on several previous occasions, our request was declined. However, Lord Birt gave evidence to us after he left the Government, and was an illuminating witness. We could see no reason why anything he said would have been inappropriate earlier. We urge the Government to stand by the undertaking in the Osmotherley Rules.

Future Work

41. The Committee has spent a great amount of 2005-06 considering the effectiveness and the constitutional position of the Civil Service. But it is equally important for us to look at the services the Civil Service runs. Across government, there is a growing strategic priority of putting user interests first, and being more responsive to ordinary citizens. The Parliamentary Ombudsman has issued Principles of Good Administration and marks the fortieth anniversary of her office in 2007. We will be focussing on the ways in which public services take into account user perspectives. We will consider how good public services are at learning from complaints, and how they collect and consider customer feedback. How much should we expect the Government to defer to local users, and when should we defer to the views of the majority?

42. Responsibility for the third sector (those institutions neither State nor private sector, including charities, community groups, trusts and social enterprises) has now been given to the Cabinet Office. We expect to take an interest in the new Office of the Third Sector and its work. As a first step, we will be looking at the role of the sector in public service delivery. Debate continues over who is best placed to provide public services—whether the State, the private sector or others. Delivering more services through the third sector is a key part of the Government’s strategy for public services. We will be looking at the relationship between the State and the third sector, and asking what role there should be for charities and non-governmental organisations in delivering what are traditionally functions of the State.

33 Liaison Committee, First Report of Session 2004-05, *Annual Report for 2004*, HC (2004-05) 419, paras 124-132

Formal Minutes

Thursday 18 January 2007

Members present:

Dr Tony Wright, in the Chair

David Burrowes
Kelvin Hopkins

Julie Morgan
Gordon Prentice
Jenny Willott

Draft Report [*The Work of the Committee in 2005-06*], proposed by the Chairman, brought up and read.

Ordered, That the draft Report be read a second time, paragraph by paragraph.

Paragraphs 1 to 42 read and agreed to.

Resolved, That the Report be the First Report of the Committee to the House.

Ordered, That the Chairman make the Report to the House.

[Adjourned till Thursday 25 January at 9.45 a.m.]

Reports from the Public Administration Select Committee since 2005

Session 2005–06

First Report	A Debt of Honour	HC 735
Second Report	Tax Credits: putting things right	HC 577
Third Report	Legislative and Regulatory Reform Bill	HC 1033
Fourth Report	Propriety and Honours: Interim Findings	HC 1119
Fifth Report	Whitehall Confidential? The Publication of Political Memoirs	HC 689
Sixth Report	Ombudsman in Question: the Ombudsman's report on pensions and its constitutional implications	HC 1081
Seventh Report	The Ministerial Code: the case for Independent Investigation	HC 1457
First Special Report	The Attendance of the Prime Minister's Strategy Adviser before the Public Administration Select Committee	HC 690
Second Special Report	Ministerial Accountability and Parliamentary Questions: Government Response to the Committee's Fifth Report	HC 853
Third Special Report	Inquiry into the Scrutiny of Political Honours	HC 1020
Fourth Special Report	Tax Credits: putting things right: Government Response to the Committee's Second Report	HC1076
Fifth Special Report	Legislative and Regulatory Reform Bill: Government Response to the Committee's Third Report	HC 1205